

The Big Picture and “The Missing Picture”: Two Films of the Cambodian Genocide

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Synopsis: The genocide perpetrated under the communist régime in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979 is a very modern tragedy, whose facts have become well known to the outside world through the numerous survivors’ memoirs and other English-language narratives that have served variously to solicit humanitarian aid, to warn against ideological tyranny, and to preserve the historical memory. Among such narratives, the 1984 film *The Killing Fields* has perhaps been most successful in inscribing modern Cambodia on the popular consciousness, but since this was a foreign film it is important to place it alongside native products, such as Rithy Panh’s award-winning documentary *The Missing Picture* (2013). *The Killing Fields* draws on a wealth of local detail to assert its historical authenticity. *The Missing Picture* is more skeptical of such claims, and in doing so attains an undeniably poetic quality.

“The sour and bitter time”

With regard to his society in which 68% of the population are under the age of 30, the Cambodian film director Rithy Panh (b.1964) comments that

Now everything is images and sound. Today, we have 3 G, tomorrow we have 4 G. We move very, very quickly. Maybe you don’t even earn one dollar per day, but you’ll have a smartphone with 4 G. So, if you want to educate your people, if you want to boost commercial exchange [use technology]. (Ellen 2013)

It is no doubt ironic that Panh should be talking about the memory capacity of smartphones, when his chosen medium of film can be said to straddle the slow recall of traditional book reading and the rapid

connections of digital technology. Yet the prevailing theme of Panh's filmmaking career over the last twenty-five years has been his painful memory of the Cambodian genocide which he experienced as a youth in the 1970s (in the Khmer language, *peal chur chat*, "the sour and bitter time"), and in telling this story he has been driven not by a desire for justice, or as it were by the finality of traditional genres, but by a need to remember and understand that has more to do with the fragmented critiques of postmodernity. Panh explains that cinema for him

is a rewinding of memory, so that the present and future generation can remember the past and learn many lessons from it. The genocide led to a drastic eradication of memory in my country. We lost our identity and our dignity, and I want to reinstate these through my films. (Shankar 2006)

Panh's latest project, a Cambodian-French documentary film about the genocide entitled *L'image manquante* (*The Missing Picture*, 2013), narrowly missed winning the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 2014, although it won a top prize at the Cannes Film Festival, and might therefore be compared with what many would regard as the definitive film on Cambodia, *The Killing Fields* (1984), a British film directed by Roland Joffé, which picked up three Academy Awards in 1985 and recouped more than twice its production costs at the box office. *The Killing Fields* is a classic narrative that tells of the victory of friendship over an inhuman régime against a convincingly south-east Asian backdrop.¹ It does in this way purport to present "the big picture" of a modern tragedy, while remaining largely silent on the clash of colonial and postcolonial forces that led to the rise of Democratic Kampuchea under its leader Pol Pot. Rithy Panh, by contrast, can have no such confidence that "his picture" is "the big picture", for as he puts it,

the missing picture is the thing that you are looking for, film after film. Each film you are looking for a missing picture and after you make one, you find another. You can find one picture but then another is missing again. (Ellen 2013)

Panh’s “missing picture” would seem to be a classic case of Derridean ²*différance*.

A comparison of these two films may also indicate ways of looking at more mainstream film dramas, such as the numerous versions made over the last hundred years of Shakespeare plays that make us wonder whether we have seen what we wanted or expected to see of a familiar story. There is, indeed, a Shakespearean dimension to modern Cambodian history if we cast Pol Pot as Macbeth (and his schizophrenic first wife Khieu Ponnary as Lady Macbeth) and the king and later prime minister Norodom Sihanouk as King Lear for selling out to communist China in 1965 by allowing the Viet Cong to establish bases within Cambodian territory. Yet this comparison would be an Orientalist fantasy, and likewise we may wonder whether Shakespeare films satisfy us as fulfilments of the original texts through the resources of film, or whether film by its nature makes an unavoidable erasure of some part of the past that in cinematographic terms constitutes “the missing picture” for which Panh is looking.³ On the Cambodian side, Orientalist fantasy is matched by the occasional postures of Sihanouk and in a much more sinister way by the Khmer Rouge propaganda films to which Panh makes extensive reference in his montage, since, although the Khmer Rouge are the obvious villains of the piece, the revolution of April 1975 was the most radical rupture from the colonialist fantasy, and so they too are involved in the search for “the missing picture”. The infinite deferral that is the search for “the missing picture” is in that sense above ideological conflict.

Evacuation

The first and defining event of the Pol Pot régime was the evacuation of the capital Phnom Penh on 17th April, 1975, when the Khmer Rouge overran the city after eight years of civil war and forced the swollen population of two million citizens and refugees to leave their homes with the few belongings they could carry and to walk through the scorching April heat for resettlement in camps long distances outside the city. There they lived and worked in harsh conditions until liberation by the Vietnamese army in 1979.⁴ Many families became divided during the evacuation as their members happened to be in different parts of the city when the Khmer Rouge started evacuating, and so walked either north, south, west or east as they were ordered. This trauma was only the beginning. Estimates vary but it is likely that under the Khmer Rouge nearly two million of the total population of seven million in 1975 died due to disease, starvation and execution (Dy, 3), with a further 650,000 dying in the famine that followed liberation in 1979.

The evacuation was the first step in the Khmer Rouge's attempt to cleanse Cambodian society of what they saw as the corrupt bourgeois influences of urban life, although only a tiny percentage of the capital's population died in the exodus, most of them personnel of the defeated republican government of Marshal Lon Nol. The real significance of the evacuation, which also happened in other centres such as Battambang and Siem Reap, was as a prelude to the complete reorganization (and purging of corrupt elements) to which the Khmer Rouge intended to submit the society, and as an event that was witnessed by a small number of foreign diplomats and journalists such as The New York Times correspondent Sydney Schanberg (b.1934), who with his Cambodian assistant Dith Pran (1942–2008) are the two protagonists of *The Killing Fields*.

For Schanberg and Pran, the evacuation of Phnom Penh represented not just a visible alienation of Cambodian society from itself but of Cambodia from the outside world, and takes up most of the first half of the film. We see the city being evacuated, a figure with a bloody stump hobbling on crutches, a lost child crying helplessly in the crowds, a soldier taking down the American flag at the embassy, a harassed, suited American ambassador holding his hair in place as he dashes for a helicopter, the suitcase of a Soviet diplomat bursting open to reveal luxury goods, and above all the scenes at the French embassy, where one of the so-called "traitors" of the Lon Nol government is taken out, shaking with terror at the prospect of certain execution, children in toe and tragically out of place in his expensive silk shirt against the red *krama* scarves of the Khmer Rouge. Observing the scene through the tropical rain, a wizened French diplomat declares, "Adieu, l'ancien régime." ("Farewell, the old régime.").

Pran's agonizing failure to get through the net and join his family in the United States after the photograph in his forged passport blurs in the rain is accepted philosophically by Pran himself, a sign that Pran has the strength to survive and that the rupture of revolution will not be permanent. This is because the loss of the image prefigures an erasure of identity that Pran must undertake in order to survive the camps to which he now disappears, and therefore contrasts eerily with the photographs that can be seen today at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, the notorious S-21 prison in Phnom Penh, where an estimated 17,000 political prisoners were taken and tortured prior to execution at the Choeung Ek "killing fields" outside the city. These pictures, taken by the guards when the prisoners arrived, are many of them all too striking in their individuality, and are surely relevant to Rithy Panh's search for "the missing picture" as well. Pran's photographic "erasure" also contrasts with the official's ironic reference to the French Revolution (*l'ancien régime*). The Terror of 1790s France led eventually, as we know, to the rise of the modern French state that annexed

Cambodia in 1867, granted it independence in 1953, and could now do little to save it from a revolution led by Paris-educated communists such as Pol Pot and his deputies Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary, a revolution that was undoubtably more brutal than its own. The Frenchman's irony, as an assertion of historic individuality in the face of a massive class struggle, is an act of colonialist "suicide", since it is the impersonal and absent made absent by the endless deferral of signification that will survive. The Khmer Rouge killed those whom they could identify — or believed they could identify — as class enemies.

Another scene from the evacuation when Schanberg and Pran visit the hospital just prior to their capture by the Khmer Rouge also captures this power of hidden resistance. As Christopher Hudson describes it in his book of the film,

The main reception area was lined with stretcher-cases left inside the main door by the ambulance teams who were working round the clock. Rows of patients, many with shrapnels and burn wounds, lay looking up patiently at the newsmen as they walked among them, their shoes sticky with blood. Some had their relatives squatting silently besides them, wiping their foreheads and swatting the flies off their open sores. A Chinese doctor, moving mechanically now after two days and nights on duty, made his way down the line tagging the cases who had a chance — as Schanberg had seen the Red Cross doctor do in the Hotel bungalow — and abandoning the rest to die. A Red Cross nurse followed him with a clipboard, ticking off the hopeful and putting a cross against the rest. (Hudson 1984, 119–120)

It is typical of Schanberg's sensitivity to Pran's feelings as a Cambodian that he should think to himself:

These were [Pran's] people *in extremis*. He had never seen such suffering, nor such patience. It was their patience that cut him to the heart. That was it: the grief went inside, leaving a patience of spirit. (Ibid.)

Schanberg himself is an impatient man: his professional job of reporting the civil war and fall of Phnom Penh thrives on this tension between his natural impatience and the patient suffering of the people around him. Similar to the energy and compassion that define Schanberg's character, the evacuation too is at once a movement of people and a purging of grief. In this atmosphere of crisis, the mass of suffering humanity overwhelms the right to both privacy and the recognition of individual needs. As the Scottish surgeon Dr. McIntyre exclaims "with the self-mocking air of a classroom lecturer":

Here we are, gentlemen. Plenty of blood around as you will see! Problem is, it's all in the wrong fucking place. (Ibid., 122)

At the end of the film, Pran's own "patience of spirit" is rewarded with a scene in which he at last makes it to the Thai border, and looking down on the plain below sees a tidy row of three red crosses, the camps of the Red Cross. The crosses on the nurse's clipboard have become symbols of hope and liberation. Pran has been living in continual fear of discovery and summary execution over the past four years, while Schanberg is plagued with guilt at his failure to get Pran out of Phnom Penh while there was still time. Schanberg asks for forgiveness when he is reunited with Pran at the Red Cross camp to which Pran can only reply, "Nothing to forgive, Sydney, nothing.". This is, of course, more a reflection of the film's humanitarian values than a specifically Christian intervention, especially as the song playing on the camp radio at that moment is John Lennon's "Imagine" (1971): "Nothing to kill for. And no religion too."

Life histories

The Missing Picture, by contrast, is a much cleaner film, with little sense of movement or transition, only one of grief and absence. Of course, it is essential to know that Rithy Panh lost his parents and most of his other immediate family from disease and malnutrition, but the film presents the evacuation of Phnom Penh primarily through anaesthetized black and white footage shot by the Khmer Rouge of empty streets and débris. Through his repeated use of propaganda films, Panh poses the rhetorical question as to whether we prefer such monochrome emptiness to the lively humanity of the street scenes he shows from before the revolution. As the narrator comments at one point, “Sometimes silence is a scream.”

This film attempts to communicate visually what it cannot rationalize verbally, since words are the beginning of ideology and “ideology is the source of tyranny”, and in this sense reflects on a problem at the heart of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal of senior figures in the régime (including Kaing Guek Ev, the commander of Tuol Sleng). By the summer of 2014, these prolonged and costly trials had finally, and with the backing of the United Nations, fulfilled their purpose of recording for posterity the truth of what happened and sending the three out of the six defendants who were still alive and fit to stand trial to prison for the rest of their lives. Incidentally, Dith Pran and the doctor who played him in the film, Haing S. Ngor, were not so fortunate. Pran died of pancreatic cancer in a New Jersey hospital in 2008, and Ngor was murdered by an Asian street gang in Los Angeles in 1996. Yet despite the pessimism of survivors like Panh, the Tribunal has been conspicuously successful in gaining support across Cambodian society, overcoming fears that the continued influence of former Khmer Rouge cadres in government might stop people from coming forward, and fulfilling the latent hopes of both the films: that, in the case of *The*

Killing Fields, the Khmer Rouge would prove too chaotic an organization to sustain itself over time and that external forces, such as Thailand and the United Nations, would come to the rescue, and in the case of *The Missing Picture*, that the memories of suffering would prove more convincing than political concerns.

The Khmer Rouge Tribunal is not “an end of history” but it does offer an opportunity for young Cambodians especially to understand their past and “to move on” without fear of retribution. Rithy Panh, through his films and his role as director of the Bophana Centre in Phnom Penh, an audio-visual archive relating mainly to the genocide, is perhaps determined more than any other that the past should not be forgotten, but as I shall argue, for Panh it is ultimately the cognitive process of memory that is more important than the bare facts. Indeed, one of the weaknesses of *The Missing Picture* may be that it is lacking in the narrative detail that helps us to appreciate the historical context of genocide, inseparable as it is from the personal histories of individuals such as Dith Pran and Rithy Panh that it sought to obliterate.

Dith Pran was born during the brief period of Japanese occupation into a middle class family in the cultural centre of Siem Reap, near Angkor Wat. In 1953, when Pran was ten, the French government granted Cambodia independence under Sihanouk, and it was French that he learnt at school, later teaching himself English, and working first as a translator for the American army, and then as an interpreter for a British film crew and as a hotel receptionist. When Pran started to work for Schanberg a few years before the revolution, Schanberg was struck by his passion for journalism, his commitment to telling the story, which later became an abiding passion to tell the story of “the killing fields”. Many older Cambodians remember the Sihanouk era as a time of relative peace and prosperity, when the country was able to feed itself and the small mercantile sector allowed to flourish, and neutrality maintained toward Western powers through alliances with

new communist states such as China and North Korea. Yet Sihanouk was also politically repressive, and it was during a visit to Moscow in 1970 that his prime minister Lon Nol seized power and had Sihanouk tried and sentenced to death in his absence. Sihanouk later became a puppet for the Khmer Rouge, a role that he soon resented, and played a key role in the 1991 Paris Peace Accords, which marked an official end to the fighting between the Vietnamese-backed government in Cambodia and the remnants of the Khmer Rouge. In 1993, he was restored as King of Cambodia, abdicating in favour of his son Norodom Sihamoni in 2004 due to ill health, and dying in Beijing in 2012 sixteen days short of his 90th birthday. In his final years, and despite repeated absences in Beijing for a quality of medical treatment unavailable in his country, Sihanouk was associated above all with the restoration of the monarchy as a force for national unity. It was against this background of shifting allegiances and perspectives that Dith Pran and Rithy Panh came of age: that Pran discovered his journalistic commitment to the truth, and Panh his need to tell the lesser stories of those excluded from “the bigger picture”.

The country in which they grew up was, and to some extent still is a Third World country in which the majority of ordinary Cambodians worked the land on subsistence wages and a small minority of mainly ethnic Chinese and Vietnamese controlled the merchant life of the cities. Before the revolution, it used to be joked that there was only one true Cambodian living in Phnom Penh, namely the king himself, but more seriously the traditional way of life of the ethnic Khmers in the countryside had never demanded the organizational skills of the Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants, since Cambodian society was based on the family rather than such abstract notions as “society”, which was why in the 1960s Cambodia was thought to be the least susceptible country in south-east Asia to communist revolution. This way of life continues to this day in many parts of Cambodia, and is poignantly portrayed in Rithy Panh’s 1994 film, *Les gens de la rizière*

(“People of the Rice Paddies”).

The myth of a timeless social order is also evident *The Killing Fields* and *The Missing Picture*, where the Khmer Rouge — “red Khmer”, Sihanouk’s nickname for the Communist Party of Kampuchea founded in 1951, later known as “Angkar”, “the Organization” — is a sinister force encroaching like a cancer on the capital that seems to have no connection with the stable urban existence of both the adult Dith Pran and the child Rithy Panh. In fact, several of the Khmer Rouge leaders were well connected within Phnom Penh society, Pol Pot with the royal palace itself, and a number of them had studied in Paris on French government scholarships at the end of the colonial period. In Paris, they acquired communism, and back in Cambodia were able to carry on their revolutionary activities in relative security until the threats from Sihanouk became intolerable; in 1963 Pol Pot fled to the jungle on the border with North Vietnam. In 1968, after Sihanouk’s pact with China and North Vietnam led to what the British journalist William Shawcross (Shawcross 1979) later exposed as President Nixon’s illegal war with Cambodia (“the Cambodian sideshow”), in other words the aid given to Lon Nol forces to bomb communist-occupied areas that accounted for most of the half a million fatalities in the civil war leading up to 1975, support shifted dramatically toward the Khmer Rouge, and attacked from the ground as well, the Khmer Rouge were going to take no prisoners. Dith Pran knows enough of what has been going on to realize that there will be a bloodbath when the Khmer Rouge arrive, while Schanberg declares characteristically that “the Khmer Rouge have killed every fucking journalist they have ever met.”

The Khmer Rouge depended on a ruthless code of secrecy from the point of their origins in late 1940s Paris,⁵ and indeed perhaps the central ideological battle fought out in *The Killing Fields* is between the democratic “right to know” represented by Schanberg (and people like David Puttnam, who produced the film on the British side) and the need to erase or keep secret all that is dangerous or inconvenient,

represented by the Khmer Rouge. For audiences of the film, whose entertainment is driven in part by a desire to know the historical facts, characters such as Schanberg and Dith Pran are naturally sympathetic. This may be the case for *The Missing Picture* as well, where perhaps the most memorable scene from the young Rithy Panh's life before the revolution is when he sits in on a downtown film shooting. An apsara dancer is dancing for the camera; Panh understands instinctively how the beauty of the young woman's apparel and the grace of her gestures are suited to the camera, and that this is a uniquely Cambodian scene. We can see how the seeds of his future career are being sown, since after escaping to Thailand he was later to study filmmaking at the prestigious Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies in Paris before returning to Cambodia in 1990. The camera enables Panh to celebrate his culture, to tell its stories and record its memories, and it gives him a power which Dith Pran did not have, namely to frame his culture and to make it his own. In fact, Pran did become a photojournalist for The New York Times under Schanberg's tutelage, but this was a career made in the United States, and for all his deservedly heroic status his memories of "the killing fields" were exclusively adult ones, not the more innocent teenage impressions of Rithy Panh. Dith Pran's abiding concern was that "the killing fields" should not be forgotten, whereas Panh's films have been exclusively about and set in Cambodia, focused on understanding the society that created the genocide and which has resulted from it.

In 1991, the 27 year old Panh won acclaim for a documentary entitled *S 21: The Khmer Rouge Death Machine* in which two of the seven known survivors of the Tuol Sleng prison are reunited with two of their former guards, and a reconciliation of sorts effected. The film is remarkable for its lack of narrative structure, being mainly a disparate but cathartic series of memories and gestures that allow all the participants to speak for themselves. In one sequence, a guard reenacts his previous routine at the prison of checking the cramped prison cells.

Hannah Sender comments that

The film shows no bias towards one subject's life over that of the other. Both are laid open to view by the discussions which occur before the lens. The first subject the audience meet is not either of the survivors but a soldier, whose mother admonishes him — ‘You have to tell the truth’ — and neutralizes her own guilt, assuring herself that she brought up her child well. A little while afterwards, the soldier insists, ‘I had always been good — I still am today’. (Sender 2014)

It is said that unlike other totalitarian régimes of modern times, which also had their torture camps and summary executions, that of Pol Pot was unique in serving an ultimate rationale of torture and execution, and was therefore motivated more by fear and paranoia than any higher ideological purpose. No Cambodian would wish to be tainted with the horror of S-21, while those who were would wish to have their guilt expunged.

With clay and water

Rithy Panh has therefore had to tread carefully, but it is a necessary process if the sadness of his generation, now in their forties and above, who have become the older generation in Cambodian society, is to be expunged as well. Panh is critical of globalization, which he sees as blocking the social memory, preventing real cultural growth. As he says,

We used to enact the Ramayana for seven days, but now, it's done in a few hours. The eradication of memory seems to have led to a near-eradication of the arts in my country. (Shankar 2006)

The director's success with *The Missing Picture* has hopefully gone some way toward reversing that situation; it is significant that the film's central motif of "the missing picture" is premised as an antidote to globalization. Globalization — as no doubt represented by box office successes like *The Killing Fields* — promises "the big picture" of who consumers are and what they need, while marginalizing an infinity of smaller pictures. Panh is wary of cinema that claims cultural authority, as a film industry that is enmeshed in the global capital network will tend to do, since for him the cinema is emphatically not "the truth" "but rather your point of view" (Ellen 2013). For this reason, *The Missing Picture* does not purport to tell the full story of the Cambodian genocide, nor even to distil it into a single image.

At one point, the film's narrator notes that while the Khmer Rouge took passport-type photographs of the many thousands interned at S-21 before their executions, there are no surviving images of actual executions taking place at Choeung Ek. Such a picture might indeed represent the definitive image of the genocide, something like the skeletal survivors of Nazi concentration camps, but could hardly claim to preserve the memory of the genocide as a three-dimensional process. What, instead, Panh seems to be wanting to show is not a single picture but a manner of being or seeing:

It's not the image that I'm looking for, it's just the way that you are looking for the missing picture. (Ibid.)

One clue as to the nature of this process might be the motif of waves washing over the camera that occurs at the beginning and the end of the film. This could represent drowning, even the loss of consciousness as the victims at Choeung Ek had their brains beaten out with hoes and pickaxes, and it could represent memory as a vital, dynamic force purging the survivors of their sadness and the viewers of their curiosity. In other words, while it may be impossible for us to know exactly what

happened in the labour camps and “killing fields”, the film may succeed in communicating some cognitive process that reproduces, if only for an instant, what Panh endured.⁶

This instant is inevitably a moment of loss, which Panh narrates partly through judicious use of Khmer Rouge propaganda footage of an allegedly happy and productive people at work in Democratic Kampuchea, but mainly through the use of the clay figurines that appear in a range of situations to reveal the régime’s human impact. Since most of these scenes are rural, set around the camps where the people were evacuated, the use of clay also emphasizes the people’s traditional relationship with the soil. As the narrator explains,

With clay and water, with the dead, with rice fields, with living hands, a man is made.

It was arguably such creativity that enabled the people’s survival in the face of the Khmer Rouge’s attempts to obliterate all connections with the past. The figurines remain static throughout the film, animated only by their juxtaposition with the propaganda and other clips, although the repetitive propaganda shots of peasants shifting earth in conical hats and black pyjamas and the stilted expressions of the party faithful in red *harma* clapping Pol Pot at a political rally seem more static by comparison. Likewise, the briefer glimpses of life before and after the revolution, in particular of young Phnom Phenoi dancing the jitterbug circa 1969, offer touching impressions of a freedom that might once have existed and might still return.

These figurines help Panh to reimagine the world he lost in 1975. One of the film’s remarkable features is how through his collaboration with his sculptor Sarith Mang the figures come to convey such an array of expressions. The most obvious change is from the coloured shirts and well-fed faces of pre-revolution Phnom Penh to the attrition and skeletal demeanour of life in the camps, where even the Khmer Rouge guards

display a certain naivety and their various construction projects seem no more than childish gestures against the weight of earth and stone. We see all the scenes familiar from *The Killing Fields*: brainwashed children accusing their parents, a mother taken into the jungle for execution after being caught stealing food, a girl crying out in hunger and then dying in her sleep on a hard bamboo bed, and perhaps most touchingly Panh's father, who was killed by the Khmer Rouge and whom Panh longs to embrace once more. In this emotional context, the figurines allow for a degree of magic realism, as when Panh imagines his dead father and brother flying through the night sky toward the stars. The sky is freedom.

The tale of the Cambodian genocide has become a fable of inhumanity and ideological madness that begs comparison with other such tales from the 20th century, and like Shakespeare's history plays opens gaps between the historical truth and its various representations. When *The Killing Fields* was released in 1984, the film brought welcome publicity for a country still in humanitarian crisis. By 2015, when life expectancy stands at over 71⁷, the challenge facing survivors like Panh has become to keep the memory of the genocide alive among a younger population likely to forget. Both films reveal much about what happened in terms of both detail and message, but they are inevitably limited by their generic techniques. *The Killing Fields* is a linear narrative: a series of powerful images leading to the emotional reunion of Schanberg and Dith Pran in the Red Cross camp in Thailand. While the film is careful to maintain political partiality, it is perhaps less able to avoid a colonialist stereotype of Cambodia as a place of intrigue and excitement that is waiting for salvation by "big white men" like Schanberg, while its very excitement risks obscuring what may be the more thoughtful and certainly more grounded insights of Rithy Panh. Panh's film, by contrast, is the more poetic of the two; it does not ask its audience to be excited by the story so that it might be moved as well.

The Killing Fields depends on big effects, the explosions and the swear words, while for Panh the big effects are ironically the language of the Khmer Rouge propaganda machine. Panh’s style is expressed in the subtle modulations of the clay figurines and, for example, a poem that he remembers his father liked, “Cheveux noirs” by Jacques Prévert, of which the narrator mentions only the title. The image of “black hair” connotes sexuality, freedom, not to mention Cambodian hair. For Panh, it is an image of loss that also locates him in the Francophone sphere to which he — like his father — belong; it works with other details and aspects of the film, such as Marc Marder’s haunting score, to evoke the film’s dominant mood of melancholic yearning. Like “the missing picture”, we will never know the origin of “the black hair”; it is one of many poetic absences. Towards the end of *The Killing Fields*, when the Khmer Rouge are under attack by Vietnamese forces, there is a scene in which a young female cadre is executed by an opposing group before an open ditch, and what we notice most about her in addition to her ambiguous expression is her silky black hair. *The Missing Picture* evokes what *The Killing Fields* showed.

Notes

¹ For obvious reasons, the film had to be made in the Philippines and Thailand rather than in Cambodia, but with Khmer-speaking actors in both major and minor roles. One typically “authentic” detail comes in an early scene when Schanberg and Pran visit a Coca-Cola factory that is under attack by the Khmer Rouge. An American military advisor arrives (in the circumstances, too late), and springs forward to hug one of the defending republican officers in a gesture that visibly embarrasses both Schanberg and Pran. Such intimacy is embarrassing in a society where people usually greet each other by placing the palms together in the traditional *sampeah*. The only time in the film that Schanberg and Pran hug each other is when they are joyfully reunited at the end.

² Derrida’s concept of difference is notoriously difficult to conceive, but is somehow more conceivable in a subliminal medium such as film. As Derrida admits, “Difference is to be conceived prior to the separation between deferring

as delay and differing as the active work of difference. Of course this is inconceivable if one begins on the basis of consciousness, that is, presence, or on the basis of its simple contrary, absence of nonconsciousness.” (Derrida 88)

³ I am referring primarily to the erasures that occur when profound aesthetic experiences are subsumed into linear narratives. In postcolonialism, erasure often refers to the loss of indigenous cultural forms, and so Panh’s logical positioning of “the missing picture” after as well as before his narrative may at least articulate a palimpsest of “the lost innocence” of pre-revolution Cambodia.

⁴ See Osborne (143–146) for an overview of the evacuation of Phnom Penh.

⁵ According to a Khmer Rouge slogan, “Secrecy is the key to victory. High secrecy, long survival.” (Dy, 2)

⁶ By cognition is meant a series of mental processes, such as memory and imagination, rather than a single moment of awareness.

⁷ Life expectancy dropped as low as twenty years during the régime, but was back above forty within a few years of liberation.

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